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Eulogy

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Three Poems · J. V. Brummels

EULOGY

What is it they wish me to say of this man
I knew only as another face in the cafe?
Old man, rancher, preceeded in death
by a wife, survived by a son living now
in a city back East, this is all I know
of him. Of death I know a little more.

I must make a beginning. I'll say,
Friends, family of the deceased, death
gathers us here in its callused hand
around the earthly part of a man,
sinful in his nature, as all men are,
born in and bound for a corruption
offensive in the nostrils of God.
So are we all bound in death and corruption.

Friends, Jesus speaks to me of that other,
untainted part in parable.

Why parable?

Because the words cannot be enough, the answer
must be in the tension among them.

I know this of death: When the cancer
ate my son like a sacrament of Satan,
I thought of nothing but a kitten
I had as a boy his age. Against the rules
my father had set I let it in the house
one fall day, and after that it wanted
nothing so much as to return. It took
to hanging by its claws to the window screens
until my father, catching it, used a stick.
I cried up into my mother's face, and she

dragged me into the house without expression.
Such a pale woman! I think that life with Father
sucked her dry of blood and its color.

They had taught me Jesus then, and I clung
to that story in my fear of death, as pitiful
as a little animal in a cold rain, spread
against His story as if for warmth. I was nought,
it seems to me now, but the thought of a naked,
pale man poking at a fire with a stick until,
white-hot with the space in the Word, I set about
His mission, passionate with the symbology of it.

Then cancer taught me the nonsense of abstraction.

I was crazy then, and perhaps God brought me back
to this world where there are at least words,
though I know no father gives up his son in mercy
to others: I was in a tavern one evening
without my collar in another town. I looked
up to taunt God into giving a sign or reason,
and there below the pressed-tin ceiling
a row of African heads were mounted in fear,
flight and ferocity, all the poses men,
in their ignorance of salvation, enact,
and one, a baboon, caught my gaze in its glass eye.
Its lips were stretched around teeth, human
but for the canines, a tongue pink and long
as a woman's, and my gorge of booze rose
in my throat with my prayers. I understood,
then, the hunter, sighted with him on the animal,
heard the report, and in the clarity
of divine light watched evil tumble
in death. I ordered meat cooked rare
and have not touched drink since.

I know these four walls, then, of the room
which is corporeal life: a kitten, a son,
another Son, an African animal without soul,
and I know, too, that another wall stands,
its door open, and something beyond beckons
to me to pass through. Finally, I know
that the pentagram is the devil's sign.

So I have made my beginning, will relate
my parable, and give benediction
in the name of the Holy Family: the blood
of the Son, the pure, passionless Mother,
the Father in whose fist is clenched our fate.

A COOL EVENING IN SEPTEMBER

I close the kitchen door on the chill
breeze and sit back down at the table.
Her ear is a punctured half-moon.
From the lobe dangles a silver star.
My eye aches down the long curve
of her neck and shoulder, the snowflake
purity of the blouse's white sleeve,
rests on the cast snake that circles her wrist.
Her brown hand's around a sweating glass.
The light glints off her nails like frost.
Our conversation is as brittle as ice,
as still as legal papers, and makes me
formal in my faded jeans and flannel shirt.
Yes I've lost weight. OK I look good.
No there's not much here for fall colors
with the trees so few and the culture here
is pretty much the bars and television.
At least, that's the part she'd recognize.